

# Inland groups working to save military bases

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By MARLOWE CHURCHILL / The Press-Enterprise

The last-minute circle-the-wagons defense won't work this time around. That's why Inland civic groups are now organized to use a new tactic against closing area military bases.

Local committees are working to keep new developments from crowding base perimeters or interfering with airspace at March Air Reserve Base and the Naval Surface Warfare Center at Norco.

And similar defensive moves are being taken by local groups elsewhere in California as the Pentagon prepares for the 2005 base closure list.

The fifth and possibly last round of base closures and realignments is set to begin Nov. 15 as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld orders each military installation to complete a detailed questionnaire justifying its continued operation.

Rumsfeld wants to trim up to 25 percent of the facilities. He will have a final list ready by May 2005. President Bush will appoint nine members in March 2005 to the Base Realignment and Closure Commission that will make recommendations and forward them to Congress in September 2005.

There is no official closure list yet, but there is plenty of speculation about which bases are facing the chopping block.

"When it comes to projecting which base is going to close, it's anybody's guess," said Army Col. Harrison Jack, the governor's top military advisor and director of the reorganized Office of Military Support in Sacramento.

Inland's economic loss

California, which saw 29 major bases closed or realigned in the first four rounds, can wage a campaign to preserve its remaining bases and enhance its defense industry by forming a special commission to work with local civic groups and the Defense Department, Jack said.

"This was one of the things that was not done in the previous rounds," said Jack, a California Army National Guard colonel.

He said he was hopeful Gov.-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger will appoint that commission as soon as possible.

California's vital high-tech and aerospace industries must be protected and expanded so they can continue to provide what Jack describes as "intellectual capital" for the defense industry. The work of scientists and engineers on new technology not only creates more civilian jobs, but it also gives California's military bases the prospect for a brighter future where they can serve new military roles and missions, Jack said.

Locally, Inland support groups are in place to help March Air Reserve Base and the 255-acre Norco naval center survive the round. Civic leaders say the lessons learned from previous closures is to not wait until the eleventh hour to act.

"To start working on this issue next year is too late," said U.S. Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, who has four bases within his district. "You have to make your case early. We have to get our message in now."

Calvert has helped local groups organize and create strategies for fighting future base closures. He has helped secure new C-17 Globemaster IIIs for March to replace aging transports. And Calvert has helped gain federal funding for improvements to March's runways and a new fire station.

The first four rounds shuttered 97 major bases and realigned 55 others for a savings of \$36.5 billion. Those closures are still creating a projected annual savings of \$5.6 billion, according to the Pentagon.

The Inland area took an economic hit estimated by economists at \$3.9 billion and lost 36,867 jobs with the closure of Norton and George Air Force Base in the 1988 closure round and the downsizing of March Air Force Base to reserve and guard status in 1993 closure round. George closed in 1992, Norton in 1994 and March was downsized in 1996.

#### Smaller sites vulnerable

The Pentagon says there are still too many bases for a U.S. military force that will continue to shrink over the years.

The Pentagon's empire ranges from remote radar sites with a handful of people to 71,000 employees at the Navy's Norfolk, Va., complex. It owns 30 million acres, including 3.6 million at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico.

This upcoming round will decide the fate of 93 large bases and 96 medium-sized ones that make up a Pentagon kingdom with 6,425 locations worldwide. Not to be overlooked are many foreign bases dating back to World War II.

Carlton Meyer, a San Francisco-based defense analyst, believes any base that cannot prove its strategic value over the next 20 years is vulnerable to closure or realignment.

Forget about local economic impact as a justification for keeping a military base open, Meyer said.

Meyer predicts California could see as many as nine closures or realignments, the largest being San Diego's Miramar Marine Corps Air Station and Marine Corps Recruit Depot. Both face encroachment issues, with new housing and commercial developments around Miramar, and the recruit depot is in downtown San Diego close to the noisy airport.

He sees tiny Los Angeles Air Force Base and the under-utilized Beale Air Force, north of Sacramento, possibly closing and even sending their people to March. A Navy post-graduate school in Monterey is also vulnerable, along with a Marine mountain warfare center north of Bridgeport in the Sierras, and the Marines' logistics depot in Barstow, he said.

Although some smaller bases face closer scrutiny, that won't be a problem for Camp Pendleton and Twentynine Palms Marine bases, Vandenberg and Edwards Air Force Bases, and Fort Irwin's National Training Center, whose critical missions put them in an almost-untouchable category, defense experts say.

#### Protection from growth

Local communities must save military bases from being swallowed up by new growth that interferes with military flights or training exercises, said Phil Rizzo, executive director of the March Joint Powers Authority.

Rizzo, a retired Air Force colonel, said the encroachment issue killed many bases nationwide in the previous rounds. He recently formed a special advisory committee composed of local planning officials to review any project that affects March's airspace and base boundaries.

March stands a better chance than many other small bases and depots because of its mobilization role of moving more than 60,000 combat troops during Operation Iraqi Freedom and its joint use by all the military branches, according to Rizzo and defense expert Meyer.

The base has an all-weather runway operation with upgraded navigational aides that some military air bases lack. Its runway operation is shared by the civilian March Joint Powers Authority. And the base is getting a new \$7 million fire station that will serve the base and the adjacent civilian cargo airport.

The base's 8,300 assigned military people will increase by up to 300 with a new \$55 million joint Army National Guard and Army Reserve training center. The base has more than 2,000 full-time military and civilian employees.

Even though Inland leaders have been proactive about protecting the base's perimeters and air space, Rizzo worries.

"There's no guarantee," Rizzo said.

Rizzo said he won't rest easy until he reads the closure list provided by Rumsfeld around May 2005 and finds March has escaped closure or further reduction.

"The base's strategic mission is the key. The March Joint Powers Authority has always taken this view: How can we support this function?"

If the community has done an adequate job of protecting March's future, Rizzo sees the base expanding.

"We have an opportunity to pick up more (military) units," he said.

Calvert said he believes March's standing is firm, but he is concentrating on saving the Norco facility, whose 940 largely civilian scientists and engineers conduct classified research.

The congressman, whose district also includes Camp Pendleton and the naval range on San Clemente Island, said the research would suffer and highly skilled government workers would resign if the Norco facility is closed.

"The problem is that there will be a lot of consolidating of research and development missions in the next closure round," he said. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to go down the list of military bases and see where you can consolidate bases and missions."

Calvert said Inland civic leaders are united and ready to take a stand to defend March and Norco's center.

"We've been making our case at March for 11 years. For Norco, that's a very unique base that you just don't move somewhere else."

*Reach Marlowe Churchill at (909) 567-2407 or [mchurchill@pe.com](mailto:mchurchill@pe.com)  
<<mailto:mchurchill@pe.com>>*